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## Viewing cable 09SANAA2186, WHO ARE THE HOUTHIS, PART TWO: HOW ARE THEY

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### Understanding cables

Every cable message consists of three parts:

- The top box shows each cables unique reference number, when and by whom it originally was sent, and what its initial classification was.
- The middle box contains the header information that is associated with the cable. It includes information about the receiver(s) as well as a general subject.
- The bottom box presents the body of the cable. The opening can contain a more specific subject, references to other cables ([browse by origin](#) to find them) or additional comment. This is followed by the main contents of the cable: a summary, a collection of specific topics and a comment section.

To understand the justification used for the classification of each cable, please use this [WikiSource](#) article as reference.

### Discussing cables

If you find meaningful or important information in a cable, please link directly to its unique reference number. Linking to a specific paragraph in the body of a cable is also possible by copying the appropriate link (to be found at the paragraph symbol). Please mark messages for social networking services like Twitter with the hash tags **#cablegate** and a hash containing the reference ID e.g. **#09SANAA2186**.

Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
<a href="#">09SANAA2186</a>	<a href="#">2009-12-09 13:29</a>	<a href="#">2011-08-30 01:44</a>	<a href="#">SECRET//NOFORN</a>	<a href="#">Embassy Sanaa</a>

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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 3355

INFO RUEHLB/AMEMBASSY BEIRUT 0191  
RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN 0122  
RUEHRH/AMEMBASSY RIYADH 1718  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC  
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC

S E C R E T SANAA 002186

NOFORN  
SIPDIS

FOR NEA/ARP AMACDONALD AND INR JYAPHE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/09/2019

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PTER](#) [PREL](#) [SA](#) [YM](#)

SUBJECT: WHO ARE THE HOUTHIS, PART TWO: HOW ARE THEY  
FIGHTING?

REF: A. SANAA 2155  
[1](#)B. SANAA 2185

Classified By: Ambassador Stephen Seche for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (S/NF) SUMMARY. Little is clear about the Houthi leadership, aside from the fact that Abdulmalik al-Houthi is the rebel group's current leader. Houthi field commanders do not seem to agree on key ideological and religious principles. The Houthis' numbers range from the hundreds to the thousands, though it is difficult to determine how many of these adhere to Houthi ideology and how many are tribesmen who have joined the Houthis' fight for other reasons. Numerous organizations have documented the Houthis' use of child soldiers, as well as violations of international humanitarian law such as looting, forced evacuations, and executions. Contrary to ROYG claims that Iran is arming the Houthis, most analysts report that the Houthis obtain their weapons from the Yemeni black market and even from the ROYG military itself. END SUMMARY.

#### LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATION

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[1](#)2. (C) Abdulmalik al-Houthi, brother of Houthi movement founder Hussein al-Houthi, is the current leader of the Houthi rebellion in the northern Yemeni governorate of Sa'ada. AP correspondent Ahmed al-Haj told PolOff on October 27 that Abdulmalik al-Houthi is a "political-military leader rather than a religious one, more of a politician than an ideologue." Christoph Wilcke, a researcher for Human Rights Watch (HRW) who visited Hajja governorate on a fact-finding mission, told PolOffs on October 26 that Houthi foot-soldiers usually do not fight in the areas where they are from, and as a result may not know the name of the local commander, but do identify their top leader as Abdulmalik al-Houthi. Beyond that, according to Wilcke, "it's not clear where the leadership sits or how it's structured." According to the International Crisis Group (ICG), there is no evidence that the rebels possess a centralized command-and-control structure, coherent ideology, or political program.

[1](#)3. (C) While AP's Haj believes the Houthis are a well-organized group, to some observers the Houthis are a rag-tag, decentralized guerrilla army. The number of fighters is estimated to be between several hundred and several thousand, though it is difficult to know how many adhere to Houthi ideology and how many are tribal fighters who joined the cause out of anti-government sentiments. There are substantial differences in ideology, strategy, and tactics among field commanders in different parts of Sa'ada. World Food Program (WFP) Representative Gian Carlo Cirri, who speaks with Houthis to negotiate passage of food aid, told PolOff on November 4 that "there is no such thing as a united Houthi command. The field commanders have a great deal of authority. They don't agree on key ideological and religious principles."

[1](#)4. (C) One example of differences among Houthi field commanders is their attitudes toward international relief

agencies. Cirri noted that Houthi field commanders "do not perceive UN and WFP assistance in the same way." For instance, the field commander in Saqayn, west of Sa'ada City, allowed relief agencies to access the area in order to distribute aid to IDPs, while the commander in the Dhahian area between Sa'ada City and Baqim is adamantly "opposed to internationals." (Note: As of early November, WFP had lost all contact with the Houthis because their main contact )- Abu Ali, the Saqayn field commander -- had died. Ali was reportedly very close to Abdulmalik al-Houthi and was number three in the Houthi organization. End Note.) The main Houthi leadership, however, does seem inclined to accept a UN or foreign role in mediation. According to UNHCR Representative Claire Bourgeois, after the October visit of UN Emergency Relief Coordinator John Holmes, the Houthis said they would agree to a humanitarian corridor if it were enforced by the UN. Houthi mediator Hassan Zaid told PolOff on December 2 that the Houthis would welcome the participation of foreign governments or multilateral organizations in negotiating a settlement to the conflict (ref a).

#### SYMPATHIZERS AND SUPPORTERS

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15. (C) AP's Haj said that many Sa'ada residents support the Houthis because of ROYG injustices, abuses by local sheikhs, and the brutality of the war. During two visits to Sa'ada in the fall of 2009, however, NewsYemen's Soufi found little support for either the Houthis or the ROYG, as the residents blame both parties for the suffering caused by the war. He said that some residents take a pragmatic approach, hedging their bets by supporting the ROYG during the day and the Houthis at night. He was struck by how isolated the people in Sa'ada are. They refer to Sana'a as "Yemen," saying "I have never been to Yemen" when referring to the capital, according to Soufi.

16. (S/NF) Colonel Akram al-Qassmi of the National Security Bureau (NSB) estimates that there are thousands of men fighting for the Houthis, but not all of them share the Houthi ideology. They "jumped on the wave" to fight for their tribe, or against the government, or against a powerful sheikh. According to WFP's Cirri, the tribes who support the Houthis have "no real loyalty" to them; they switch sides based on "direct, immediate private interests." He believes the conflict is extremely localized: families and tribes decide to support the Houthis based on specific grievances )- including the lack of payment of blood money -- that they have against the government or more powerful tribal leaders. NewsYemen's Soufi thinks that many of the rank-and-file are thugs who are taking advantage of the conflict to gain power and resources.

#### HOUTHI GOVERNANCE

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17. (C) Many analysts report that the Houthis establish their own system of governance in the areas they control. According to Mohammed Azzan, presidential advisor for Sa'ada affairs, the Houthis are trying to create a "state within a state." Mohammed al-Qadhi, correspondent for Dubai-based The National, reported that in Haydan district, the Houthis have established courts and prisons. Soufi reported that the Houthis in Harf Sufyan have established Islamic courts, impose their own laws on local residents, demand protection money, and dispense rough justice by ordering executions. AP's Haj argues that the Houthis are winning hearts and minds by providing security in areas long neglected by the ROYG. According to Haj, the Houthis limit the arbitrary and abusive power of influential sheikhs. According to Abdulmajid al-Fahd, Executive Director of the Civic Democratic Foundation, Houthis help resolve conflicts between tribes and reduce the number of revenge killings in areas they control. (Comment: While claims that Houthis are establishing a parallel state seem far-fetched, it is likely that the Houthis are attempting to arbitrate local disputes. End Comment.)

## HOUTHI ABUSES: CHILD SOLDIERS AND ALLEGATIONS OF "SHIELDING"

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¶8. (C) Numerous organizations, including Save the Children, UNICEF, and Islamic Relief, have documented the Houthis' use of child soldiers. HRW's Wilcke reported that Houthis use boys as young as 13 as guards; older teenagers are used as fighters. According to UNHCR interviews with IDPs, "Their reasons for leaving their places of origin include ... forced enrollment of children as young as 14 in guerrilla forces," as well as forced taxes, destruction of properties, and heavy weapon shelling by both sides. Judith Evans, a Times of London reporter who visited the Mazraq IDP camp (Hajja governorate), told PolOff on October 12 that she heard many accounts of atrocities against civilians by the Houthis. She said, "The refugees we spoke to were terrified of the government bombing raids, but it seems the Houthis take things a step further and deliberately target civilians, including children, for instance, shooting them in their houses as an act of revenge for siding with the government." Saba, the government news agency, reported on December 6 that the Houthis killed an 11-year-old boy in retaliation for his father's refusal to join them.

¶9. (C) While the ROYG repeatedly accuses the Houthis of using civilians as human shields, Wilcke noted that "shielding" has a very specific definition in international human rights law, requiring intent to expose civilians to danger in order to fend off a military advance. HRW does not have enough evidence to conclude that the Houthis are intentionally using civilians as human shields, he said,

though Wilcke admitted there may be cases they have not been able to document. However, HRW has documented a number of other Houthi violations of international humanitarian law, such as looting and forced evacuation (in which civilians are told to fight with the Houthis or flee). He said HRW also documented assassinations, which, depending on the circumstances, could be regular crimes or rise to the level of war crimes.

¶10. (C) With respect to humanitarian aid, WFP's Cirri said that the Houthis have never stopped any WFP food convoys; they once stopped an ADRA convoy in Al Jawf but allowed it to pass. Rather, it is often tribes demanding aid or government concessions who hold aid convoys hostage. In addition, one joint WFP-UNHCR convoy was stopped for three weeks by the government.

## TACTICS AND STRATEGY

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¶11. (S) According to journalist Qadhi, the Houthis have gained experience from each round of fighting, as shown by their use of more sophisticated tactics. HRW's Wilcke said that the Houthis now dig trenches around towns so that the artillery shells, which explode upwards, do not hit them. The British DATT believes that the Houthis' advances in tactics and strategy indicate that they have received outside training, though he did not say by whom. Early in the sixth war, he said, the Houthis focused on collecting and capturing weapons and resources. He told PolOff on November 21 that unlike previous rounds of fighting, in the sixth war there have been some set piece battles, including an attempted takeover of the Republican Palace in Sa'ada City involving hundreds of Houthi fighters. Such large battles are unusual, however. Murad Zafir, Deputy Director of the National Democratic Institute, said that Houthi fighters generally attack in groups of three to five people, including one sniper. That way they minimize their own losses while driving up the costs of the army, which is using big bombs on small groups of fighters. Col. Mansour al-Azi, a senior military intelligence officer, told PolOff on November 24 that the Houthis fight with religious fervor, yelling "God is Great" when running into battle, unafraid of dying because they believe that if they do, they will go directly to

paradise.

WEAPONS SUPPLY

¶12. (S/NF) Contrary to ROYG claims that Iran is arming the Houthis, most local political analysts report that the Houthis obtain their weapons from the Yemeni black market and even from the ROYG military itself. According to a British diplomat, there are numerous credible reports that ROYG military commanders were selling weapons to the Houthis in the run-up to the Sixth War. An ICG report on the Sa'ada conflict from May 2009 quoted NSB director Ali Mohammed al-Ansi saying, "Iranians are not arming the Houthis. The weapons they use are Yemeni. Most actually come from fighters who fought against the socialists during the 1994 war and then sold them." Mohammed Azzan, presidential advisor for Sa'ada affairs, told PolOff on August 16 that the Houthis easily obtain weapons inside Yemen, either from battlefield captures or by buying them from corrupt military commanders and soldiers. Azzan said that the military "covers up its failure" by saying the weapons come from Iran. According to Jamal Abdullah al-Shami of the Democracy School, there is little external oversight of the military's large and increasing budget, so it is easy for members of the military to illegally sell weapons.

¶13. (S/NF) ROYG officials assert that the Houthis' possession and use of Katyusha rockets is evidence of support from Iran and Hizballah, arguing that these rockets are not available in Yemeni arms markets nor ROYG stockpiles. (Comment: Given Yemen's robust arms markets, especially in Sa'ada, it is possible that Katyushas are available on the black market even if they are not in ROYG stockpiles. According to sensitive reporting, there is at least one instance of Somali extremists purchasing Katyusha rockets in Yemen in 2007. End Comment.) However, according to sensitive reporting, it may have been the ROYG military who aided the Houthis in obtaining a shipment of 200 Katyusha rockets in late November 2009.

SECHE